

WASHINGTON - The House on Tuesday approved a plan to mint commemorative coins to help fund construction of the first-ever disabled veterans memorial in the nation's capital.

The bill, co-sponsored by Reps. Dennis Moore, R-Kan., and Mark Kirk, R-Ill., would direct the U.S. Treasury to produce 350,000 silver dollar coins to honor the estimated 3 million U.S. veterans permanently disabled while serving in the armed forces.

A special surcharge on the coins would go toward the fund to build the memorial on an impressive 2-acre site near the National Mall, just steps from the Capitol.

"More and more of our brave men and women are returning home with injuries that will affect them for the rest of their lives," Moore said. "We can never fully communicate our gratitude for the service and sacrifice that our servicemen and women have made for our country, but this memorial is an important step."

The Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation, the group planning the project, already has raised more than \$25 million toward the \$65 million in private fundraising needed to build the memorial. It is expected to be built over the next three years.

Inspiration for the memorial came from philanthropist Lois Pope, who helped persuade Congress to pass legislation authorizing the tribute in 2000.

Recently, a charity watchdog group gave the memorial foundation poor marks for how it spends money to raise funds.

"They get a zero star out of a potential four stars," said Sandra Miniutti, spokeswoman for New Jersey-based Charity Navigator. "That's our lowest rating."

Miniutti said the foundation spends less than a third of its budget on programs, but spends nearly two-thirds its budget on fundraising expenses.

"Most groups spend 13 cents to bring in a dollar, while Pope's group spends 88 cents to bring in a dollar," Miniutti said.

But the unfavorable rating, which came to light in a legal dispute between Pope and her son, has not discouraged lawmakers from supporting its goals.

Moore said his staff reviewed financial statements prepared by an independent auditing firm and concluded that the foundation "has and will continue to work expeditiously towards their goal of building a quality memorial that will honor our disabled servicemen and women."